

Kidnapping for marriage (*ala kachuu*) in a Kyrgyz village

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Introduction

Ala kachuu is the act of abducting a woman to marry her. It includes a variety of actions ranging from elopement or staged abduction for consensual marriage to violent non-consensual kidnapping. ‘Kidnapping’ refers to the non-consensual variety, which typically involves a young man and his friends taking a young woman by deception or force to the home of his parents or a near relative. She is held in a room until his female relatives convince her to put on the marriage scarf. If necessary she is kept over night and sometimes raped, and is thus threatened by the shame of no longer being a pure woman. This research provides evidence that more than a third of ethnic Kyrgyz women have been married by non-consensual kidnapping, and that the practice has been increasing for at least the last half century. The paper describes all forms of *ala kachuu* and raises ethical concerns about non-consensual kidnapping.

Background

Ala kachuu for some time has been widely accepted in the published literature as a Kyrgyz traditional practice.¹ There is, however, no consensus among Kyrgyz people as to whether or not *ala kachuu* should be considered a ‘Kyrgyz tradition’. Conversations with both older people and youth, and a recent discussion section of a local newspaper in Kyrgyz claim that it is not a tradition.² Part of the difficulty is with translating *ala kachuu* into Russian and English as bride ‘kidnapping’. In Kyrgyz, *ala kachuu* is two words literally meaning ‘to take and run away’.

In 1938, Fannina Halle described the practice and claimed that instances of bride kidnapping in Central Asia were simply ‘symbolic relics’ of a more prevalent and violent practice.³ Toursunof and Abdylbaeva write that *ala kachuu* as a practice may have its roots in a custom that ‘can be traced back to ancient Kyrgyz history, when Kyrgyz males kidnapped marriageable young women from neighboring tribes in order to wipe out enemies and increase their own clans. . . . A woman would be taken to a groom-to-be’s home, where she could

attempt to break free if she so desired.’⁴ Abramzon states that non-consensual kidnapping of brides was historically uncommon:

Bride kidnapping (*kыз ala kachuu*) as a form of marriage in the past was rare. According to our interlocutors in Tien Shan, if a man seeking in marriage did not have resources to pay for *kalym*, then he first paid a small amount and then having agreed with a woman, kidnapped her. After that the father of the man had to visit the woman’s father and ask for forgiveness for his son. This visit was called *aldyna tushuu* [sic]. After reconciliation, the bride’s mother visited the groom’s parents bringing dowry with her. According to Jumagulov A., a man kidnapped a bride in those cases when his relatives were influential people and could support him, or a young man’s matchmakers were not successful, or a bride’s parents were against the marriage. Kidnapping took place, as a rule, with bride’s agreement. People resorted to bride kidnapping relatively rarely mostly due to conflicts that would engage a wide circle of relatives and tribal members from both sides, which could result in tribal hostility sometimes ending with severe consequences.⁵

Karimova and Kasybekov write that, ‘In the 18–19th centuries kidnapping of a girl was the only way for a loving couple to get married if they could not do it for reasons of parental non-consent or issues of money. Differing social situations would not allow a poor guy to marry a daughter of a *bai*.’⁶ The whole family clan would stand against the mismatch. The only way out was *ala kachuu*.’⁷ She also writes that, ‘In ancient times society severely punished a guy for such an audacious action. Thieves of brides were stoned to death or thrown from minarets, including the Burana Tower.’⁸ Several descriptive narratives of contemporary kidnappings are in the literature⁹ and now on film.¹⁰

There is a near consensus among scholars and the general public that according to the most accepted Kyrgyz tradition the parents of a bridegroom or the bridegroom himself choose a bride. Then the man’s parents ask the parents of the woman and if they and the woman agree, there is a marriage. In some cases, *ala kachuu* is a practice that allows young adults who want to marry, to do so when their marriage is not approved by their parents for financial or social reasons such as different class status or the parents having arranged their marriages to others.¹¹ In this case, it is consensual between man and woman, and is really a staged abduction, or elopement. This field survey evidence also suggests that kidnapping of brides may have been happening early in the 20th century, although not as frequently or incorporating violence and non-consent to the same degree as now.

At this time, the published literature, interviews with scholars, people in villages, and the evidence from our current research would suggest that prior to the 20th century the practice of bride kidnapping was uncommon (both consensual and non-consensual), hence not a ‘tradition’. Our theory at the time of writing this paper is that in ‘ancient’ times when the Kyrgyz tribes were still primarily nomadic, it occasionally happened that men from one tribe would steal women from other tribes for wives (*ala kachuu*). However, this was not the normal or usual way for marriages to be established. The traditional marriage was arranged, or at least approved, by the parents, either within or between tribes. This was the predominant practice prior to the 20th century.

The Soviet period brought an ideology of male–female equality and secular, rational freedom from traditions such as arranged marriage, bride price and payment of dowry. In this context young men and women may have wanted to exercise the new equality and independence from parental control over choosing their marriage partners, and chose to legitimate this action by imitating the ancient form of *ala kachuu*. If done with the mutual consent of the man and woman, it would allow for freedom of choice and be legitimated by a traditional practice, albeit one previously infrequently used. Coincidentally, it would also lower the overall cost of a traditional wedding. The problem, however, is that the manifest appearance of *ala kachuu* marriages is non-consensual. To the community and especially to younger men and women what appeared was the revival and legitimating of a non-consensual tradition.

There is considerable published material asserting that non-consensual kidnapping for marriage was common in the Soviet period and has been on the increase since 1991.¹² The statistical evidence from the current study suggests that in at least the last half of the 20th century there was a gradual increase until the practice had evolved and become quite common and increasingly non-consensual. Now a young man, usually with the help of some of his male friends and a significant amount of alcohol, deceive or force a young woman into a car, after which, she is taken to the home of a female relative of the man, where she is culturally, psychologically and often physically forced to put on the marriage scarf.¹³ Sometimes she is raped as a means of coercing her to submit and accept the marriage. Our first study showed 84 per cent of kidnapped women do not leave and are married as a result.¹⁴ Previous research concluded that approximately one-half of ethnic Kyrgyz women are kidnapped for marriage and that approximately two-thirds of those kidnappings were non-consensual.¹⁵ Based on the earlier and current studies, we believe that as many as 35–45 per cent of ethnic Kyrgyz women are forced to marry someone, not of their choosing, through the process of kidnapping. The quantitative and qualitative evidence now exists¹⁶ to establish that non-consensual *ala kachuu* is a violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1981), and the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic.¹⁷

Research methods

The present survey (conducted in January, 2004) duplicated the descriptive questions of our first study¹⁸ and was done to validate the accuracy of the results of the earlier studies that described the characteristics and frequency of *ala kachuu*. The present survey included all women of one village so that we may also determine any patterns of change in frequency and consent level for different age groups.

For this study a single village was selected, whose population was primarily ethnic Kyrgyz, large enough to provide a representative sample of this region of the country, and small enough so that all the women in the village could be surveyed. By surveying all the women (age 16 and above) we hoped to include all women who are now or were married. The goal was to cover all age cohorts in

order to learn whether the frequency of *ala kachuu* is increasing or decreasing, to learn if the level of consent is changing, and to learn if other characteristics of the practice were different for different age groups.

The research village located in the north-eastern region of the country had 504 households. The village was also selected because the researchers had excellent contacts with residents of the village who facilitated the research process. An unrelated community project did a detailed census of the village in 2003, and we were able to use this information to have very current data, including the sex and age of all residents.

The research project was directed by four faculty members of the American University—Central Asia (AUCA). The University administration wrote an introductory letter to the research village council that stated that the research was sponsored by the University, and requested that the village council approve and endorse the research by adding their seal and signature to the letter. This was done by the council after being given a written description of the research and copies of the research instrument. Copies of the council endorsement were carried by research teams and shown to residents in the village to help legitimate the research process.

The canvassing was done door to door by teams comprised of one AUCA female student and one female teacher or senior female student from the local high school. The local teachers and students provided knowledge of the village and introductions for the AUCA students who were the surveyors and who answered all questions about the survey questions in private with the respondents. This process provided access to the homes, and anonymity for the respondents, as neither their questions nor the questionnaires were seen or handled by anyone who knew them. Ten teams canvassed 424 of 504 households and collected 564 questionnaires in three and one-half days. The village received a computer for the village office, and each participating household received a small box of tea by the research teams, as it is customary for visitors to a household to bring small gifts. While in the village, the AUCA students stayed with local families. One of the secondary goals of this project was for AUCA students to have the personal experience of participation in practical research at the village level.

The questionnaire used in this study had been filled out previously by 300 respondents in 1999.¹⁹ In 2001, a shorter version, covering the questions of age, ethnicity, and consent was filled out by approximately 550 respondents.²⁰ These two previous surveys were filled out by respondents from six of the seven *oblasts* in the country.²¹ They were filled out by both men and women, describing kidnappings with which they were familiar, not usually their own. The present study only asked women to fill out the questionnaires about themselves. Respondents had a choice of Kyrgyz or Russian language questionnaires to complete. The questionnaires gathered demographic data and information as to whether or not the women had been kidnapped. If they were kidnapped, information was gathered on when the kidnapping took place, who was involved in the planning and actual kidnapping, what were the motives for the kidnapping, what was the level of consent by the couple and families, whether or not a marriage resulted

from the kidnapping, and the present status of a resulting marriage. The results of this research were (with some variations) consistent with the results of the two previous surveys.²²

Results

Who are the men and women involved in bride kidnapping?

The 2004 research village is predominately an ethnic Kyrgyz village (96 per cent). Of the 543 Kyrgyz respondents, 374 (80 per cent) reported to have been kidnapped, ten of them more than once. There were six non-ethnic Kyrgyz kidnappings: three Kazak, two Kalmyk and one Uzbek. Unless otherwise noted, the statistics given below describe only the Kyrgyz respondents and are usually rounded to the nearest percentage point.

At the time of the kidnapping the mean average age of the women was 20 years and of the men 24 years. Table 1 illustrates the education levels at the time of the kidnappings. These results are consistent with the 1999 study and reveal a reasonably well-educated population.

What was the familiarity among men and women involved in kidnappings?

According to the respondents, 9 per cent of the men kidnapped women whom they did not know, whereas 22 per cent of women said they were kidnapped by men whom they did not know.²³ When asked if the man was in love with the woman he kidnapped, 41 per cent of the respondents answered positively. A similar question about whether the women were in love with the men yielded a figure of only 26 per cent. As with our first study,²⁴ we see that approximately one-fifth of the kidnapped women did not know the men they were to marry, and only a quarter claimed to be in love with their future husbands.

What is the degree of mutual consent by men and women involved in kidnappings?

Based on the results of this survey, the level of mutual consent in kidnappings in Kyrgyzstan is relatively low. According to our respondents (see Table 2) only 34 per cent of the kidnappings were conducted with the woman's consent. Forty-six per cent of the respondents said they were kidnapped through deception and 18 per

Table 1. Education level of men and women at the time of the kidnappings

	Men (%)	Women (%)
Less than secondary education	10	12
Secondary education	34	27
Some university or technical school	39	38
University education	14	21

Table 2. Degree of mutual consent by men and women involved in kidnappings

	Women (%)
Woman kidnapped with her own consent	34
Woman kidnapped through deception	46
Woman kidnapped by physical force	18
Man helped plan the kidnapping	76
Woman helped plan kidnapping	6
Friends of man helped plan kidnapping	73
Friends of woman helped plan kidnapping	9
Friends of the man helped kidnap woman	84
Friends of woman helped kidnap woman	12
Mother of man wanted kidnapping to occur	23
Mother of woman wanted kidnapping to occur	4
Father of man wanted kidnapping to occur	18
Father of woman wanted kidnapping to occur	2

cent by physical force. The differences in the desires of the man and woman's parents are also notable in a culture where arranged marriages are or were common. Among the mothers of the men, 23 per cent wanted the kidnapping to happen, but only 4 per cent of the mothers of the women desired it. Among fathers of the men, 18 per cent wanted the kidnapping *vs.* 2 per cent of the fathers of the women.

Thus while the non-consensual kidnapping of a bride is obviously an act of male dominance, the fact that such a small percentage of parents support the act before it happens suggests that this is not an 'ethnic ritual embedded in patriarchal daily life',²⁵ as the patriarchal tradition is for there to be a marriage arranged, or at least approved beforehand, by the two family patriarchs. Beyond this, the evidence that approximately one-third of *ala kachuu* marriages are consensual points to the fact that the practice is complex and varied, and in a minority of cases is an act of gender equality over-riding traditions of male dominance and patriarchy. This is evidenced also by the reasons given as to why the woman was kidnapped.

Why were women kidnapped?

When asked why this woman was kidnapped, the respondents were given eight possible choices and could check as many answers as applied (see Table 3). The four most frequent reasons given were: 'It is a good traditional way to get a bride' (38 per cent), 'Woman might refuse marriage proposal' (29 per cent), 'To prevent the woman from marrying another' (28 per cent), and 'Woman had refused marriage proposal' (12 per cent).²⁶ These figures support the belief that many people accept that this is a legitimate tradition. The responses demonstrate a low level of respect for the rights of women to choose their husbands. Finally there is evidence that in some cases this process may be used by young men (sometimes with the agreement of young women) to bypass the will of either set of

Table 3. Why was this woman kidnapped?

	Women (%)
It is a good traditional way to get a bride	38
Woman might refuse marriage proposal	29
To prevent woman from marrying another	28
Woman had refused a marriage proposal	12
Parents of woman might not agree to marriage	7
Man was unable to pay <i>kalym</i> (bride price)	3
The woman was pregnant	2
Parents of man might not agree to marriage	1

parents, including arrangements for different marriages. It also raises a question of a lack of dating culture in traditional villages that would provide space for a broader pool of eligible men to choose from, for women.

How often did kidnappings result in marriage and eventually divorce?

The great majority of the kidnappings described in this survey (92 per cent) resulted in marriage. In 8 per cent of the cases, the women refused to stay or their relatives came and took them home. One woman reported being kidnapped three times, and finally on the third time she agreed to stay. Of the marriages that took place, 6 per cent reported ending in divorce.

How have frequency and consent level changed over time?

Grouping the respondents in age groups of ten years, we were able to estimate the change in frequency of kidnapping and the change in level of consent over the last half century (see Table 4). For example, of the women 76 years or older,

Table 4. 2004 Village kidnapping frequency and consent level

Age	Married women kidnapped (%)	Kidnappings without consent* (%)	Married women, kidnapped without consent (%)	Number of respondents
76 +	64	43	27	11
66–75	64	56	36	36
56–65	73	25	18	44
46–55	88	54	47	82
36–45	83	57	47	126
26–35	78	65	51	87
16–25	85	75	63	117
Average	80	57	45	503

*By deception or force, not in love and woman not wanting to be kidnapped.

64 per cent were kidnapped, with 43 per cent of these kidnappings being non-consensual. The result being that 27 per cent of all married women in this age group were married by non-consensual kidnapping. For all married women 36 to 56 years of age this figure had risen to 47 per cent, and for all married women 16–25 years of age, 63 per cent were married by non-consensual kidnapping. This evidence suggests an increase in both consensual *ala kachuu* and non-consensual kidnapping of brides not just after the Soviet period, but over the last 40–50 years (see Figure 1). The implication of this is that prior to the Soviet period non-consensual kidnapping was rare. These findings are consistent with Cynthia Werner’s research on bride kidnapping in Kazakhstan.²⁷

Conclusions

The 1999 and 2001 data provided evidence that approximately 50 per cent of ethnic Kyrgyz marriages were the result of kidnappings. These data provided evidence that as many as 66 per cent of these marriages were non-consensual. The first two studies concluded that approximately 33 per cent of ethnic Kyrgyz women were married against their will as a result of bride kidnapping. The 2004 data show that 80 per cent of Kyrgyz marriages in this village are the result of kidnappings. These data illustrate that 57 per cent of these marriages are non-consensual. The 2004 village study suggests that 45 per cent of the ethnic Kyrgyz women are married against their will as a result of bride kidnapping. Based on the cumulated data from the three studies, we estimate that approximate 35–45 per cent of married ethnic Kyrgyz women are married against their will as a result of bride kidnapping.

The evidence from the 2004 village study suggests the rate of kidnapping and the rate of non-consent have been increasing for the last 40–50 years. The

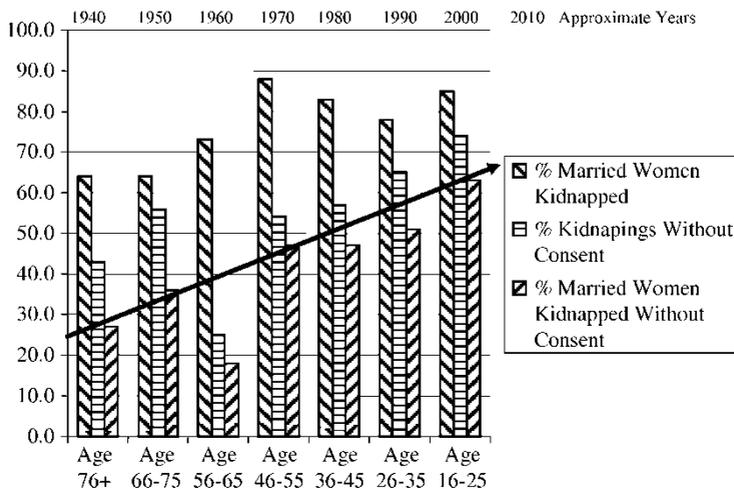


Figure 1. 2004 Villlage: frequency of kidnapping and consent level over time.

percentage of women kidnapped has increased from 64 per cent to over 85 per cent and the percentage of women kidnapped without consent from 43 per cent to 75 per cent for the 16–25 year-old age group. The weight of the evidence here points to an increase in male dominance rather than to a practice that counters arranged marriages and affirms a lover's option. If it were primarily a lover's option, a much higher percentage of the kidnap-marriages would be consensual.

The results raise serious questions about the impact of bride kidnapping on the rights of women, particularly those related to Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which asserts that 'marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses'. It also violates Article 16 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1981), which states that 'parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations and in particular shall ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women: (a) The same right to enter into marriage, and (b) The same right freely to choose a spouse and to enter into marriage only with their free and full consent'. Moreover, it violates Article 1 of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993), that states, 'For the purposes of this Declaration, the term "violence against women" means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.'

Non-consensual *ala kachuu* violates Article 155 of the Criminal code of the Kyrgyz Republic, 'Forcing a woman to marry or to continue a marriage or kidnapping her in order to marry without her consent, also standing in the way of marriage (impediment) is subject to punishment as a fine in the amount of 100 to 200 minimal wages per month or to imprisonment up to five years.'

Programs and future research

Research needs to be done into the degree to which, if at all, non-consensual kidnapping of brides is a 'Kyrgyz tradition' that predates the Soviet period. The evidence of this research suggests an increase in both consensual *ala kachuu* and non-consensual kidnapping of brides not just after the Soviet period, but over the last 40–50 years. The implication of this is that prior to the Soviet era non-consensual kidnapping was rare. If this is true, the important question to be answered is why this practice developed and increased to the extent that it has.

Also, research needs to be done on Kyrgyz *adat*, i.e. the ancient customary law. Material originally published in 1897 on Turkmen *adat*²⁸ makes it clear that by Turkmen customary law (pre-dating *Sharia*), 'pretended abductions' of brides with their consent is acceptable. It was also a way for a girl to marry without her parents' consent.²⁹ However the first article for declaring a marriage invalid and legitimately dissolved is, 'If married under compulsion (a girl or a widow)

proves that during the marriage ceremony she didn't consent to marry and was married by force.³⁰ Research is needed to determine if Kyrgyz *adat* is similar to Turkmen customary law. An aspect of this research will focus on the revived *aksakal* (elders') courts to determine if they are supporting the practice of non-consensual kidnapping³¹ or if they are basing their decisions on an interpretation of *adat*, that supports only parentally arranged marriages and abduction by consent.

There is also some anecdotal evidence emerging that the practice of non-consensual bride kidnapping was very uncommon prior to the 20th century.³² The source gives an account by a grandparent of the first such kidnapping in her region. This may, of course, tell us more about the moral ambiguity of the practice in the eyes of many Kyrgyz than about its true historical origins.

There are programmes being developed to eliminate the practice of non-consensual *ala kachuu*. These exist at least in Bishkek city, Jalalabat, Issykul, Naryn and Talas regions.³³ Our research is being done partially to provide statistical data for use in these programmes. The research and related educational efforts have also resulted in a web page being created that is 'Dedicated to Understanding *Ala Kachuu* and Preventing Non Consensual Marriage', and 'Pledges of Resistance' for men and women being written and distributed, films being produced and lecture series being given around the country.³⁴ UNDP Kyrgyzstan has even published an educational cartoon book³⁵ depicting young women kidnapping a young man and showing a mocking perspective of *ala kachuu*.

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3. Halle, op cit, Ref 1, pp 92–93.

4. H. Toursunof and A. Abdylbaeva, 'Marriage of inconvenience', *Transitions Online*, 2003, available at <<http://knowledgenet.tol.cz/look/TOLnew/article.tpl?IdLanguage=1& IdPublication=4&NrIssue=45&NrSection=2&NrArticle=9381>>.
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8. *Ibid*.
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17. United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Adopted and proclaimed by General Assembly resolution 217 A (III) of 10 December 1948; United Nations, *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, General Assembly resolution 34/180, 34 United Nations, 1981. GAOR Supp. (No 46) at 193, UN Doc A/34/46, entered into force 3 September 1981, available at <<http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instreet/e1cedaw.htm>>; *Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic* (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan).
18. Amsler and Kleinbach, op cit, Ref 9.
19. *Ibid*.
20. Kleinbach, op cit, Ref 9.
21. *Oblast* is an administrative district in the Kyrgyz Republic. Currently, there are seven oblasts in the country.
22. Amsler and Kleinbach, op cit, Ref 9; Kleinbach, op cit, Ref 9.
23. These figures are lower than Handrahan's (2004, op cit, Ref 1, p 220) reporting of 176 men, 35 per cent of whom reported kidnapping strangers.
24. Amsler and Kleinbach, op cit, Ref 9.
25. Handrahan (2004), op cit, Ref 1, p 223.
26. B. Pusurmankulova, 'Bride kidnapping: benign custom or savage tradition?', *Voice of Freedom Initiative of the Human Rights Working Group*, 15 June 2004, available at <<http://www.freedomhouse.org/>> surveyed 300 respondents in the southern part of the country. Among the questions and responses was, 'Why do young men start a family by kidnapping brides? Here 27 [per cent] of all respondents mentioned economic reasons. They said it helps reduce marriage expenses. More than 34 [per cent] of the respondents think that young men steal those girls who do not agree to get married. And about 25 [per cent] of the respondents said it is very convenient when you have to marry urgently.'
27. C. Werner, 'Women, marriage, and the nation-state: the rise of nonconsensual bride kidnapping in post-Soviet Kazakhstan', in Pauline Jones Luong, ed, *The Transformation of Central Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp 59–89. Werner's research (see pp 83–84) shows that in Kazakhstan, 'From 1946 to 2000, the percentage of kidnap marriages with strong consent declined from 75 per cent (1946–1970) to 35 per cent. . . . These findings correspond to a popular perception that the percentage of nonconsensual kidnapping is on the rise. Informants who were married in the 1960s and 1970s point out nostalgically that the kidnappings in the past were almost always with the girl's consent, and she was typically informed where and when the kidnapping would take place.'
28. A. Lomakin, *The Common Law of the Turkmens (Adat)* (Ashgabat: "Ylym", [1897], 1993), p 10.
29. *Ibid*, p 21.
30. *Ibid*, p 23.
31. Handrahan (2004), op cit, Ref 1, p 213.
32. Orozobekova, op cit, Ref 9.

33. See Orunbaeva, *op cit*, Ref 13. Tukan Orunbaeva is a leader of 'Bakubat' NGO in Naryn, Kyrgyzstan. She has conducted a number of seminars for male students in armed forces in Naryn. Orunbaeva's goal was to educate young males against bride kidnapping. She has also produced a documentary film, which she shows during her seminars. Orunbaeva is a gynecologist in a local hospital where she works mostly with young women. From their stories of unhappy marriages based on kidnappings without their consent Orunbaeva devotes her time holding seminars, presentations and meetings with students in colleges, universities and high schools.
34. R. Kleinbach, 'Ala Kachuu', retrieved on 27 June 2004, available at <http://faculty.philau.edu/kleinbach/ala_kachuu.htm>.
35. E. Dj. Schukurov, *Gendernye Otnosheniya: Uroki Vzroslenia* (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan: UNDP, 2003).